

North Korea Diplomacy: October 2018 Status Report

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Summary of Developments During 2018

Since North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in early 2018 dropped the belligerent posture that Pyongyang had displayed the past several years and embarked on a “charm offensive,” he has held three summits with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, three with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and one with President Donald Trump, in Singapore in June 2018. The United States and North Korea are considering a second Trump-Kim summit in the coming months.

To date, these summits and other events have produced the following results:

North Korea’s Nuclear and Missile Programs

- Kim publicly [agreed](#) to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” To that end, he has [agreed](#) to the “permanent dismantlement” of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, “as the United States takes corresponding measures,” and pledged to dismantle North Korea’s Sohae missile and satellite launch site in the presence of international inspectors. Kim also agreed to allow experts to visit the Pyunggye-ri nuclear test site, where in May North Korea collapsed testing tunnels, to verify the site is no longer functional.
- North Korea [pledged](#) not to conduct nuclear or long-range missile tests while dialogue continues. No such tests have occurred since November 2017.

Diplomatic and Economic Developments

- Kim’s international image has been boosted substantially.
- North Korea and China have reset their relationship, which had been strained since Kim became leader in 2011.
- Several countries [appear](#) to be enforcing international sanctions against the DPRK less aggressively than before the rapprochement period began. China, Russia, and South Korea have called for an easing of sanctions.

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- Inter-Korean relations have blossomed. Kim [agreed](#) to visit Seoul by the end of 2018 “if possible,” potentially the first trip to Seoul by a DPRK leader since the end of the Korean War. The two Koreas opened their first-ever permanent liaison office, agreed to begin reconnecting road and rail links, and restarted family reunions and civil society and sports exchanges.
- The DPRK, ROK, and the United States agreed to build a “peace regime,” the first step of which appears to be a declaration formally ending the Korean War.

Military Developments

- The two Koreas agreed to a number of military confidence-building measures, including creating a no-fly zone along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and withdrawing guard posts within the DMZ. Many of these changes appear to have been made without the full support of U.S. military commanders.
- Trump suspended major annual U.S.-South Korea military exercises, which he called “provocative,” during nuclear negotiations.

Humanitarian Developments

- North Korea released three U.S. detainees.
- The U.S. and DPRK opened talks on restarting efforts to recover the remains of U.S. troops unaccounted for during the Korean War. North Korea repatriated the remains of possible U.S. servicemembers.
- The Trump Administration renewed restrictions on using U.S. passports to travel to North Korea, and [reportedly](#) stopped granting special permission to groups seeking to administer humanitarian assistance programs in North Korea.

Questions

Several questions remain unanswered.

- **How significant are Kim’s nuclear and missile pledges?** Trump has [tweeted](#) that “there is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea,” and Moon has [said](#) that if North Korea follows through on Kim’s existing promises, it essentially will be unable to advance its nuclear and missile programs. However, many U.S. and ROK experts are [skeptical](#) because North Korea has yet to disclose the composition or size of its nuclear material or warhead stocks and facilities, including those *not* at Yongbyon. North Korea and the United States also have not publicly agreed on what constitutes “denuclearization” or the meaning of the phrase “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Nor have they agreed on a timeline or verification measures for dismantlement. North Korea “continue[s] to produce fissile material,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [testified](#) in July, shortly after U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly gathered [evidence of DPRK efforts to conceal](#) parts of its nuclear programs. Pyongyang also reportedly has continued working on [more advanced long-range missiles](#).
- **What are the “corresponding measures” the United States must take for North Korea to dismantle Yongbyon?** Moon has stated that concessions by the United States and DPRK should be made in a “[balanced manner](#),” and that the United States should “put an end to hostile relations” and “provide security assurances to the North,” as Trump promised in Singapore. However, U.S.-DPRK talks are stymied by disagreements over which party needs to move first and on what measures. Without such an agreement, the policy logjam could continue.

- **Do the inter-Korean military agreements limit the U.S.-ROK alliance's capabilities?**
Some defense analysts claim that the dramatic expansion of existing no-fly zones could curtail the alliance's ability to conduct surveillance on North Korean military activities north of the DMZ. Together with the removal of guard posts in the DMZ, North Korea may be better positioned to launch a surprise attack.
- **Would a peace declaration weaken arguments for keeping U.S. troops in the ROK?**
Moon said that he and Kim wish to issue by the end of 2018 a "political statement" declaring an end to the Korean War and launch negotiations for a peace treaty, which would be signed "when the North achieves complete denuclearization" and when U.S.-DPRK relations are normalized. It is unclear whether the declaration also would include the other two principal combatants, the United States and China. Moon said the declaration would "in no way affect the status" of U.S. forces in South Korea, which "depends entirely on a decision made between South Korea and the United States" and that "Kim agreed on this issue." Nevertheless, some analysts worry that issuing a peace declaration is premature before North Korea takes further steps to reduce the threat it poses, and that such a document could undermine the rationale for the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea.
- **How much strain is being put on U.S.-South Korea relations by disagreements over the best mix and timing of concessions to offer and pressure to place on Pyongyang?**
The two governments' tendencies of making policy decisions without significant, or at times any, prior consultation or coordination with each other has added to the strain.

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